

Ziegler and company create a medical marijuana cooperative in Susanville

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Nov. 14, 2006 — Once again, the medical marijuana war breaks into an open boil right here in Susanville. Proposition 215, the Compassionate Use Act, was passed by the people of the state of California 10 years ago last week, but the controversial issue still remains unresolved.

HEADLINE
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News Editor

To some seriously ill people in our community, the pungent herb is a God-given painkiller that works better than any man-made drug. But to some of our local city leaders and law enforcement officials, it's just plain old dope.

While the battle rages all around him, local medical marijuana farmer Timothy Ziegler, 47, bristles at the suggestion he's a drug dealer.

He always refers to his plants and the big, potent buds he grows in several different rooms of an old commercial building a stone's throw off Main Street as medicine.

He said the drug dealers are out in the bars or in the park hawking their wares to customers who seek a quick buzz. He said that's not him and that's not his purpose.

He said it's easy to see the difference between marijuana the drug and marijuana the medicine once one sees a patient curled up on a couch in a fetal position in excruciating pain take a dose or two of medicine and then be well enough to sit up and eat some food. Maybe even watch a little television.

"You're going to watch this happen and then tell me somebody can't do this?" an incredulous Ziegler asked.

He said most of the medical marijuana users he's encountered use the drug because of chronic pain, but other users include cancer and AIDS patients. Some use the drug to ease their nausea. Others use the drug to help build their appetite and combat wasting.

Ziegler said three local doctors write recommendations for patients to use marijuana as an alternative to stronger, addictive, and to some, more dangerous and damaging pharmaceuticals.

"If I wanted to be a drug dealer, I'd be growing hundreds of plants on federal land," Ziegler said. "I'd be a whole lot richer than I am now. Just look at this place. You can see there's no money in this."

Ziegler, a medical marijuana patient who started using the drug after he was crushed by a wall in a construction accident at a Lake Almanor building site three years ago, said marijuana allows him to have a life without the opiate painkillers he said were stealing his life and reducing him to little more than opiate eyes.

"I've been clean and sober for 22 years," Ziegler said. "I quit doing everything. After 19 years of sobriety, I got crushed, breaking my back and three ribs in nine places, leaving me in constant pain. I have an addictive personality, and taking those pain medications was turning me into a junkie. It just wasn't an option. That's how I got into medical marijuana."

Ziegler said he and 104 other medical marijuana patients have formed the CASA Collective Cooperative — Californians for Safe Access — here in Susanville.

"We're a patient's group," Ziegler said. "We're patients helping patients."

According to Ziegler, the collective has 104 medical marijuana recommendations from Lassen County patients. The recommendations and photocopies of picture ID cards are all gathered in a file folder to show law enforcement officers should the cooperative be raided.

Unfortunately, Ziegler said he couldn't grow enough medicine for so many patients and remain below the federal radar. Federal law does not recognize a medical marijuana defense, and a convicted grower with more than 99 plants faces a mandatory five-year prison sentence. For that reason, Ziegler said he never grows more than about 99 plants. Some counties in California will let a medical marijuana patient

have as many as eight mature plants.

"One hundred plants," Ziegler said, "that's the magic number."

Ziegler said he has to travel to the Bay Area to purchase medicine for himself and the other cooperative members. He said that's more expensive for collective members.

"Bob Burns turned me over to the feds," Ziegler said. "I'm prepared for them to come. What I'm doing is federally illegal. When they come, they take everything. It's all gone. It's all confiscated. But in the last five years no one with a legal medical marijuana claim has done more than the booking time in Northeastern California. Jail is an ever-looming threat for me and every patient in the collective. You listen to every sound. Every day you wonder, 'Is today the day.' There's a lot of fear."

Ziegler characterized the issue as a struggle with a group of city leaders who refuse to recognize and follow the laws of the state of California.

"They don't want to acknowledge it," Ziegler said of the medical marijuana law. "They don't want to acknowledge they are subject to the laws and the Constitution of the state of California in this city."

While a city ordinance makes it illegal to operate a medical marijuana dispensary in Susanville, Ziegler said the cooperative gets around that restriction by operating a delivery service.

Ziegler said he's very careful to make sure the medicine he grows remains medicine and doesn't wind up as illegal drugs on the street.

"I'm guilty of doing what I despise — profiling," Ziegler said. "We don't want to be involved with anyone if we're suspicious they're distributing medicine to other people. All it would take is one incident, and they (the authorities) would have everything they needed."

While there might be big money in drug dealing, Ziegler said growing medical marijuana is a not-for-profit venture.

When he can't grow enough medical marijuana for the patients Ziegler makes a trip to another cooperative to purchase medicine.

Trips to the Bay Area to purchase medicine cost about \$600 in gas, food and lodging. A pound of medical marijuana from another cooperative costs about \$4,000. The patient pays about \$250 per ounce.

"There's just no profit in it," Ziegler said. "It's not there. Do the math."

Ziegler said given the overhead and the high cost of electricity there's not much profit in the plants he grows himself. He said each plant grown indoors yields about 2-1/2 ounces of medicine. Keeping under the federal sentencing limit of less than 100 plants limits how much medicine Ziegler can grow for the cooperative's patients.

The cooperative has five employees and is open from noon to 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Ziegler said the cooperative is a non-profit corporation that keeps regular business records, pays taxes and worker's compensation just like any other business except Ziegler's not entitled to sell, only seek reimbursement for time and materials.

Ziegler said he starts cloned plants hydroponically so they develop a strong root structure.

He said his plants are all grown organically without any pesticides or chemicals, which could be harmful to some patients. For example, mites, a typical pest for marijuana gardeners, are controlled with ladybugs.

Once the small plants are strong, they're moved to a second "veg room" where they sit under grow lights nearly 24-hours per day. The plants grow rapidly in this environment.

Finally the plants are moved to a "sleep room" where the number of hours of light per day is gradually diminished. Marijuana plants are light sensitive, so the buds form and grow larger as the number of hours of light the plants receive each day is reduced.

Finally, the buds are trimmed, cured and dried before they are bagged and used as medicine.

The entire process of the indoor grow reduces the plants' life cycle from eight or 10 months to two or three months. A plant grown outside could yield as much as one pound of medicine.

Ziegler staunchly defends his right to do what he's doing under California law.

"If I'm doing something wrong, how come I'm still here doing this two years later?" Ziegler asked.